

Pandora

A Greek myth

Retold by W.T. JEWKES

It was not enough for Zeus that Prometheus be punished; the father of gods knew that man also bore some responsibility for the act of defiance. So the cloud-gatherer sent for Hephaestus, the blacksmith of Olympus.

"Hephaestus," he thundered, "as the price of the fire which men have received from Prometheus, I am resolved to give them an evil thing, something that they will cherish and take delight in, but that will bring upon them unending grief. Go back to your workshop and set to work. Take earth and plaster it with water, infuse into it a human voice, breathe into it the breath of life. Make limbs that move, beautiful limbs like those of a supple young girl, and a face like that of an immortal goddess. Let Athene help you; tell her I want her to teach this woman her household arts, and especially how to do intricate weaving. And then put Aphrodite to work, filling her heart with desire and longing and words of golden endearment. And see that you leave her head empty, ready for my gift."

So, while the lame smith hobbled away to his workshop, Zeus himself set to work on a project of his own. He found a large jar with a lid, and in it he imprisoned all the Spites that might plague mankind—Old Age, Labor, Madness, Sickness, Hunger, Treachery—all the troubles that could come upon man, day or night. This he set to one side, and waited for Hephaestus.

Meanwhile, back in his workshop, the lame smith took a large tub of clay, and began to work and model it in the likeness of a graceful young girl. When he had finished, he called Athene to come and dress her, and the Graces to adorn her with necklaces and dazzling gold ornaments. The Seasons combed out her beautiful black tresses and put on her head a coronal of spring flowers. Then the four Winds came from the corners of the earth and breathed life into her. Last of all,

Hermes came to view the work. The herald of the gods put a soft, persuasive voice in her and gave her the name Pandora, which signified that the Olympian gods had each given her a gift. And Zeus laughed long and loud when he saw how well his fellow gods had carried out his wishes. It was some satisfaction to think that this bewitching, enticing creature would bring misery on disobedient man.

"Hermes," he roared, "she is superb! She will suit my plan to perfection. Now she is ready for my gift."

And the cloud-gatherer took his gift, fatal curiosity, placed it on his hand, and blew thunderously. Off flew the treacherous gift and entered into Pandora's head. Zeus laughed again and turned to Hermes.

"Now, slayer of Argus, it is fitting that you get the honor of taking her to that slow-witted brother of Prometheus. You mustn't let him know what a deceptive-looking bargain she is. Tell him that I am sending her to him to show my good will. And take this jar along with you as a personal gift from me."

So off Hermes sped, propelled by his winged sandals across the heavens, with Pandora in his arms, and the jar strapped to his side. In no time at all he had met up with Epimetheus, who was sitting with his head in his hands, sadly meditating on his poor brother's fate.

"Epimetheus," said the messenger of the gods as he alighted beside him, "why so gloomy? You look as though you'd lost your best friend."

"I have," replied Epimetheus. "Prometheus is more than a friend to me; he is a brother. I don't know how I'll get along without him. It is just too terrible. To think that Zeus could be so vengeful."

"Well, there is an end to his anger, anyway," declared Hermes. "Look, I have brought this woman for you, at his request. It is his way of trying to ease the pain he has caused you by punishing Prometheus."

Epimetheus had already found that he was unable to take his eyes off the dazzlingly beautiful young woman who stood beside Hermes, smiling in a very friendly and enticing way at him. He wasn't sure he was even hearing Hermes aright.

"Did you say she has been sent for me?" he asked, in a daze. "For me?"

"That's what I said. Zeus wants her to be your wife."

Somewhere in the very back of his mind, among misty memories, there stirred the echo of something Prometheus had once said to his brother: "Remember, Epimetheus, never accept anything that Zeus may send as a gift to you. The father of gods often intends evil to mankind, and there is no telling how he might try to disguise his pur-

pose." But it was only an echo, a far-back faint voice, and poor Epimetheus's head was still swimming from the vision of dark hair and flashing eyes that stood before him.

Surely even Prometheus would have admitted that a woman as beautiful as Pandora could not be part of an evil plot. Now the jar—that was something different. Who knew what it contained, closed tightly by that lid. That indeed might be a trick.

"What is her name?" he finally managed to ask.

"Pandora," replied Hermes.

"Does she want to be my wife?"

"Yes she does. Can't you see how much she likes you?"

"Well," Epimetheus declared, "I never thought I'd have such luck!"

So it was settled. They were married, and Epimetheus took her to live with him. And he found that besides being beautiful, it was very pleasant to have her around, even if she was inclined to chatter a good deal, and needed a firm hand at times when she was minded to be willful.

One day, as she was restlessly wandering around the courtyard, Pandora noticed the beautiful urn standing on a low wall.

"Oh, husband," she cried, stroking its smooth, curved sides, "what a beautiful jar! Where did it come from?"

"Oh, that? Hermes brought it when he brought you. It's a personal gift from Zeus."

"But why do you keep it covered?" she went on, trying to remove the tight-fitting lid from the jar.

"Don't take off that lid!" shouted Epimetheus, jumping up and snatching back her hand.

"But why not?" she pouted.

"Because I suspect something is wrong with that jar. Zeus sent it as a personal gift, and my brother Prometheus warned me about the danger of gifts from Zeus. And Prometheus always was smarter than I. So it's best that we do what he asked."

But Pandora was not to be put off by her husband's cautions.

"Sometimes I think he is just plain stupid!" she mused that evening as she looked once again at the intriguing jar. "Or maybe he does it just to spite me. I simply can't go on not knowing what the inside of that jar is like."

She looked around the shadowy courtyard, and seeing that no one was near, she took the jar firmly in one hand, while with the other she worked at the lid. It was stiff, but it began to give. Then, suddenly,

it came loose on one edge. At once there issued a fearsome noise, wild groans and shrieks, and a terrible smell like burning sulfur. There followed a dank, rushing wind from the jar, and black shapes sprang forth and began to bite and pinch at the poor girl. In terror she dropped back the lid and began to scream. Almost at once Epimetheus came at a run to see what was the matter, and he too was attacked before he could reach her. Smarting with the pain of the nips and pinches, he grabbed Pandora by the arm, dragged her into the nearest room, and slammed and barred the door.

"Oh, husband," sobbed the terrified young woman, "you came just in time!"

"No," replied Epimetheus, shaking his head. "Too late, Pandora, too late. You've ruined everything now."

But though neither of them knew it at the time, Pandora had not quite ruined everything. When Zeus had been imprisoning all those Spites in the jar, something else had sneaked in unknown to him, and had settled right to the bottom.

And though she had let the Spites loose from the jar, Pandora had also released the one thing that would comfort men through ages of anxiety. This was Hope.

• How is the story of Pandora like the biblical story of Adam and Eve?

Why do you think people would make a myth like this one about Pandora?

Prometheus had warned that fire was a dangerous gift. It had two faces, the helper and the devourer. How is the curse of the Spites the "other face" of the gift of fire?

• What does this myth say about the price of progress? Do you think it is appropriate to our own age? In what way?

Try writing a myth-like story about the "price of progress." You could set the story in a future time. Tell what happens to people as a result of a "gift" received that helps them make material progress. Who gives the gift? Does the gift have two faces? Is there a "price" placed on the gift? Does a flaw in someone's character cause the other face of the gift to show itself?

The Origin of Death

A Hottentot myth
Retold by PAUL RADIN

The Moon, it is said, once sent an insect to men, saying, "Go to men and tell them, 'As I die, and dying live, so you shall also die, and dying live.'"

The insect started with the message, but, while on his way, was overtaken by the hare, who asked, "On what errand are you bound?"

The insect answered, "I am sent by the Moon to men, to tell them that as she dies and dying lives, so shall they also die and dying live."

The hare said, "As you are an awkward runner, let me go." With these words he ran off, and when he reached men, he said, "I am sent by the Moon to tell you, 'As I die and dying perish, in the same manner you also shall die and come wholly to an end.'"

The hare then returned to the Moon and told her what he had said to men. The Moon reproached him angrily, saying, "Do you dare tell the people a thing which I have not said?"

With these words the Moon took up a piece of wood and struck the hare on the nose. Since that day the hare's nose has been slit, but men believe what Hare had told them.

Do you think this myth was comforting to the people who told it? Why?

What does this myth suggest to you about the power of words?

Each of the first three myths in this unit offers an explanation of why suffering and death are part of human life. How are the explanations alike? How are they different?

Phaethon

A Greek myth
Retold by EDITH HAMILTON

The palace of the Sun was a radiant place. It shone with gold and gleamed with ivory and sparkled with jewels. Everything without and within flashed and glowed and glittered. It was always high noon there. Shadowy twilight never dimmed the brightness. Darkness and night were unknown. Few among mortals could have long endured that unchanging brilliancy of light, but few had ever found their way thither.

Nevertheless, one day a youth, mortal on his mother's side, dared to approach. Often he had to pause and clear his dazzled eyes, but the errand which had brought him was so urgent that his purpose held fast and he pressed on, up to the palace, through the burnished doors, and into the throne room where surrounded by a blinding, blazing splendor the Sun-god sat. There the lad was forced to halt. He could bear no more.

Nothing escapes the eyes of the Sun. He saw the boy instantly and he looked at him very kindly. "What brought you here?" he asked. "I have come," the other answered boldly, "to find out if you are my father or not. My mother said you were, but the boys at school laugh when I tell them I am your son. They will not believe me. I told my mother and she said I had better go and ask you." Smiling, the Sun took off his crown of burning light so that the lad could look at him without distress. "Come here, Phaethon," he said. "You are my son. Clymene told you the truth. I expect you will not doubt my word too? But I will give you a proof. Ask anything you want of me and you shall have it. I call the Styx to be witness to my promise, the river of the oath of the gods."

No doubt Phaethon had often watched the Sun riding through the heavens and had told himself with a feeling, half awe, half excitement,

"It is my father up there." And then he would wonder what it would be like to be in that chariot, guiding the steeds along that dizzy course, giving light to the world. Now at his father's words this wild dream had become possible. Instantly he cried, "I choose to take your place, Father. That is the only thing I want. Just for a day, a single day, let me have your car to drive."

The Sun realized his own folly. Why had he taken that fatal oath and bound himself to give in to anything that happened to enter a boy's rash young head? "Dear lad," he said, "this is the only thing I would have refused you. I know I cannot refuse. I have sworn by the Styx. I must yield if you persist. But I do not believe you will. Listen while I tell you what this is you want. You are Clymene's son as well as mine. You are mortal and no mortal could drive my chariot. Indeed, no god except myself can do that. The ruler of the gods cannot. Consider the road. It rises up from the sea so steeply that the horses can hardly climb it, fresh though they are in the early morning. In mid-heaven it is so high that even I do not like to look down. Worst of all is the descent, so precipitous that the Sea-gods waiting to receive me wonder how I can avoid falling headlong. To guide the horses, too, is a perpetual struggle. Their fiery spirits grow hotter as they climb and they scarcely suffer my control. What would they do with you?

"Are you fancying that there are all sorts of wonders up there, cities of the gods full of beautiful things? Nothing of the kind. You will have to pass beasts, fierce beasts of prey, and they are all that you will see. The Bull, the Lion, the Scorpion, the great Crab, each will try to harm you. Be persuaded. Look around you. See all the goods the rich world holds. Choose from them your heart's desire and it shall be yours. If what you want is to be proved my son, my fears for you are proof enough that I am your father."

But none of all this wise talk meant anything to the boy. A glorious prospect opened before him. He saw himself proudly standing in that wondrous car, his hands triumphantly guiding those steeds which Jove himself could not master. He did not give a thought to the dangers his father detailed. He felt not a quiver of fear, not a doubt of his own powers. At last the Sun gave up trying to dissuade him. It was hopeless, as he saw. Besides, there was no time. The moment for starting was at hand. Already the gates of the east glowed purple, and Dawn had opened her courts full of rosy light. The stars were leaving the sky; even the lingering morning star was dim.

There was need for haste, but all was ready. The seasons, the gate-

keepers of Olympus, stood waiting to fling the doors wide. The horses had been bridled and yoked to the car. Proudly and joyously Phaethon mounted it and they were off. He had made his choice. Whatever came of it he could not change now. Not that he wanted to in that first exhilarating rush through the air, so swift that the East Wind was outstripped and left far behind. The horses' flying feet went through the low-banked clouds near the ocean as through a thin sea mist and then up and up in the clear air, climbing the height of heaven. For a few ecstatic moments Phaethon felt himself the Lord of the Sky. But suddenly there was a change. The chariot was swinging wildly to and fro; the pace was faster; he had lost control. Not he, but the horses were directing the course. That light weight in the car, those feeble hands clutching the reins, had told them their own driver was not there. They were the masters then. No one else could command them. They left the road and rushed where they chose, up, down, to the right, to the left. They nearly wrecked the chariot against the Scorpion; they brought up short and almost ran into the Crab. By this time the poor charioteer was half fainting with terror; and he let the reins fall.

That was the signal for still more mad and reckless running. The horses soared up to the very top of the sky and then, plunging headlong down, they set the world on fire. The highest mountains were the first to burn, Ida and Helicon, where the Muses dwell, Parnassus, and heaven-piercing Olympus. Down their slopes the flames ran to the low-lying valleys and the dark forest lands, until all things everywhere were ablaze. The springs turned into steam; the rivers shrank. It is said that it was then the Nile fled and hid his head, which still is hidden.

In the car Phaethon, hardly keeping his place there, was wrapped in thick smoke and heat as if from a fiery furnace. He wanted nothing except to have this torment and terror ended. He would have welcomed death. Mother Earth, too, could bear no more. She uttered a great cry which reached up to the gods. Looking down from Olympus they saw that they must act quickly if the world was to be saved. Jove seized his thunderbolt and hurled it at the rash, repentant driver. It struck him dead, shattered the chariot, and made the maddened horses rush down into the sea.

Phaethon all on fire fell from the car through the air to the earth. The mysterious river Eridanus, which no mortal eyes have ever seen, received him and put out the flames and cooled the body. The naiads, in pity for him, so bold and so young to die, buried him and carved upon the tomb:

Here Phaethon lies who drove the Sun-god's car.
Greatly he failed, but he had greatly dared.

His sisters, the Heliades, the daughters of Helios, ~~the Sun~~, came
to his grave to mourn for him. There they were turned into poplar
trees, on the bank of the Eridanus,

Where sorrowing they weep into the stream forever.
And each tear as it falls shines in the water
A glistening drop of amber.

Many myths are narratives that reflect a society's important rituals. On
one level, the story of Phaethon may reflect a sacrifice ritual in ancient
Greece. One day a year, at sunset, a king would pretend to die. A young
boy, chosen as a temporary king or interrex, would marry the queen, reign
for one day, and then be killed, often dragged behind a sun-chariot drawn
by wild horses. How is the Phaethon story related to the ritual of the
interrex?

✓ On another level, how do you think Phaethon's quest may be a search to
find out who he is?

✓ What does he discover?

Phaethon

Apollo through the heavens rode
In glinting gold attire;
His car was bright with chrysolite,
His horses snorted fire.
He held them to their frantic course
Across the blazing sky.
His darling son was Phaethon,
Who begged to have a try.

"The chargers are ambrosia-fed
They barely brook control;
On high beware the Crab, the Bear,
The Serpent round the Pole;
Against the Archer and the Bull
Thy form is all unsteeded!"
But Phaethon could lay it on;
Apollo had to yield.

Out of the purple doors of dawn
Phaethon drove the horses;
They felt his hand could not command.
They left their wonted courses.
And from the chariot Phaethon
Plunged like a falling star—
And so, my boy, no, no, my boy,
You cannot take the car.

MORRIS BISHOP